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Apr 17, 2007

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Sunday Mar 18

Ending 4 years of war

Rep. Lantos voted for Bush's plan, now he pushes for change

By Shaun Bishop / Daily News Staff Writer

The fourth anniversary of the war in Iraq, says Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, should never have come.

Had the war been properly managed, "we would have finished years earlier at a fraction of the human and financial cost," he said.

Lantos, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 26 years, is sharp in his criticism of the Bush administration's handling of the war. But he says he is confident change will come soon in the conflict in which more than 3,200 American troops have died.

"This administration is still stubbornly sticking to staying the course," Lantos said in an interview Friday at his office in San Mateo. "I'm confident we are moving in the direction of, first of all, de-escalating, redeploying and very importantly, taking care of our vets who come back."

The veteran congressman and chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs says he intends to be active in the effort to make the changes happen.

Criticized by some for casting a vote in 2002 in favor of authorizing the war, Lantos co-sponsored a non-binding resolution that passed in the House on Feb. 16 opposing Bush's proposal to send an additional 20,000 troops to Iraq. At the time, Bush said they had voted on a plan "that they have not given a chance to work."

Now, Lantos plans to throw his support behind a bill that passed the House Appropriations Committee on Friday to approve an additional \$95.5 billion to continue funding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with several conditions, including that combat would end by Sept. 1, 2008. It is expected to be heard by the House this week.

He said the resolution would "give a major momentum to bringing home our troops" from "the most universally mismanaged war in American history." "This will be an accelerating train and the administration will have no option but to change its position," he said.

Lantos' comments came as several Peninsula groups planned to hold events calling for President Bush to bring the troops home as public opinion of the war's handling remains low.

"It's just something we feel is important to keep up," said Mike Caggiano, president of Peace Action of San Mateo County, which joined a candlelight march in San Mateo on Friday. "You just do whatever you can to get as much of your message out."

Caggiano said a few people from his group protest every Saturday outside Lantos' office in part because of his authorizing vote in 2002, though Lantos refuses to apologize for the move and says it was the right thing to do with the information the Congress had.

Lantos said he is committed to restoring the public's confidence in its elected officials and the prestige of the United States abroad. "It will take years to rebuild this," he said.

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Konstandinos Goumenidis / Daily News

Six-year-old Sarah Wannonam of San Francisco gives the peace sign as anti-war activists march through downtown San Mateo on Friday with lit candles and signs to commemorate the Iraq war's anniversary, which will be Monday, March 19.

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